A Good Start To Life

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I live in the State of Colorado. Recently, two universities in this state suffered the deaths of young people caused by the abuse of alcohol. This was fostered by the binge drinking culture that seems to be a part of university life in many places today. Freshman college students today are in a rough situation. They are moving away from a high school environment, where most of them had many friends and, hopefully, parental supervision, to a college/university environment where they have no friends and no supervision.

Unfortunately, many students feel an easy way to meet and make new friends is to go out drinking. This often turns into a habit and sometimes a lifelong problem in the cases above, not a very long life.

Drinking is certainly not a new problem. It existed when I first attended college 50 years ago. The difference was that there were more alternatives to finding ways to have social interaction. One option during my time in college was a student square-dance club.

In the 1950s, student square dance clubs at universities and colleges were a very strong social force. In Colorado, the five largest universities/colleges in the state all had student square-dance clubs. At Colorado A&M College, where I went, the student square-dance club was named the Aggie Haylofters was the second-largest club on campus. The only larger club was the Ag Club which made sense at an agricultural college.

There is no doubt in my mind that the presence of a Square Dance Club at the college played a powerful role in many of our lives. It was a place where we could gather and dance in an atmosphere where there was no social pressure to drink or date or do anything else than have a good time dancing with a lot of fun people.

To give you some idea of the popularity of square dancing, the total student population of Colorado A&M in 1955 was around 4500. The square dances attracted 10 to 12 squares of dancers each week. For those of you who are reading this and are not square dancers, that's 80-100 students - a pretty good-sized crowd.

We not only square danced but danced mixers, and an occasional contra dance every evening, usually a Virginia reel. For those in the audience that are not dancers, mixers are dancers where you exchange partners. Contras are done in long lines of facing men and ladies.

Learning how to square dance was a simple process. You found a partner, got into position number 4 in the square, and watched what everyone else was doing. Most of the figures we were dancing then were known as visiting a couple of figures. The first couple would lead out to the second couple and do whatever the caller told them to do.

Then they would proceed to the third couple and do the same. By the time the active couple reached your spot, you had a good idea of what was going to occur. Later on, as square dancing became more complicated, we held square dance lessons. Eventually, there were about 50 basic commands we had to master. However, the lessons were never more than 6-10 weeks in length and started at least three times every school year.

Students did the calling. When you got the itch to become a caller, you bought a couple of records or selected something from the club record collection and went to a book titled "Sets-in-Order Five Years of Square Dancing. This publication was

a collection of square-dance routines published from 1950 to 1955 in a magazine titled Sets-in-Order. You picked out a dance routine and memorized it and with a microphone in hand, and you took your turn.

Probably far more important than dancing was the fact that Aggie Haylofters was an ideal place to meet new people and make new friends. Many of us were overwhelmed by college. We were learning to study. We were learning to live apart from our families. Frankly, many of us were scared to date or even approach the opposite sex. Square dancing provided a non-threatening environment to test the social waters.

Let me set a scene for you. On "club" night, almost everyone came to the dance as singles. When the first square was announced, you could choose a partner from the sidelines or go to an empty spot in a square and hold up your hand. Unless you hadn't bothered to take a bath, someone was always willing to fill the empty spot. After all, a tip (composed of a patter call and singing call) was only going to last about 7-9 minutes, and you could escape if you wanted to, to find another partner. By the end of the evening, you had identified at least a couple of compatible partners. This usually meant they were willing to meet your eye when you were looking around for someone to dance the next tip. At the end of an evening of dancing, you would usually have danced with five to seven different partners. That is a pretty effective formula for meeting and making new friends.

Of equal importance was the fact that drinking and square dancing do not mix. You can't think fast enough to square dance after you have a few brews under your belt. So, the contacts among people were not tainted by the effects of booze.

Now, I'm not trying to imply that we were all teetotalers. Many of us also drank and partied, but frankly, most of the time, it was more fun to go to the square dance. It was usually a preferred alternative to sitting in a bar or around a keg of beer.

Square dancing was also a lot cheaper. Most of us were going to college on a very tight budget. Since the college was providing the dance space and the callers were students, the cost of an evening of dances was maybe about the amount you would pay for a soft drink. Pretty affordable for anyone.

I can honestly tell you that square dancing in college probably saved me from being a social recluse. As a freshman, I was bashful and withdrawn. I was taking a hefty class load and, to get into veterinary school, good grades were paramount. Square dancing once a week provided a place where I could get away from the pressure cooker—a place to unwind.

Without this release valve, I would have probably turned to abusing alcohol like a lot of the kids do today. As it turned out, I found a wife, a lifetime dance partner, and a lifetime avocation. Both have lasted for almost fifty years now. It all started in college square dance club.